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ABSTRACT

A content analysis of scientific communication in the behavioral sciences from 1900 to 1970 was undertaken to ascertain whether or not a shift in orientation of research from negative to positive forms of social behavior has been occurring in recent years. Positive behaviors are those which emphasize the well-being and integrity of other persons while negative behavior is expected to circumscribe or destroy the freedom, expression, integrity, or well-being of other persons. Studies from "Psychological Index" and "Psychological Abstracts" from the period 1900 to 1970 and from 1975 were classified according to a positive-negative continuum (using words judged as positive or negative by a panel), according to types of subjects (animals, children, or adults), and according to methodologies (experimental, descriptive, theoretical, or psychotherapeutic). It was confirmed that recent trends are toward positive studies which affect choice of subjects--higher use of human adults and reduced animal research--and choice of methodology-increase in experimental studies leading toward a more positive orientation. (TJ)

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A Comparison of Research on Positive and Negative Social Behaviors

Lauren Wispé

The present study involves a content analysis of scientific communication in the behavioral sciences. Even a brief perusal of research in the behavioral sciences during the past decade suggests that a subtle valuational shift is in progress. Whereas studies of "aggression," "competition," and "lying" have been around for a long time, there are now studies of "altruism," "attraction," "bystander intervention," "helping," and "trust," to mention only a few of the more recent developments. Perhaps this shift can be characterized as a reorientation in research from studies of "negative" to "positive" forms of social behavior. The distinction between "positive" and "negative" behaviors is obviously complicated. The apparent ease with which this ubiquitous polarity is intuitively grasped is deceptive in practice. Clearly both the actor's intentions and the situational context are important in determining whether behavior is positively or negatively oriented. But neither of these aspects is easily assessed, and, in any case, such an assessment would not lead to general definitions of "positive" and "negative" behavior. Textbooks refer to positive and negative behaviors in the general sense, but the terms "positive" and "negative" usually remain undefined. The usual linguistic criteria are also not applicable. In the end, Osgood's (8) intuitive criterion seems most helpful; the feeling that somehow "honesty" is positive with regard to "cheating," "sympathy" is positive with respect to "aggression," and "altruism" is better than "egoism." Using this intuitive criterion, and guided by current usage in the behavioral sciences, rough definitions of "positive" and "negative" forms of social

CS502199

behavior were constructed. Briefly, "positive" behaviors are those that intend the well-being and integrity of other person(s), while "negative" behaviors are expected to circumscribe or destroy the freedom, expression, integrity, or well-being of other person(s). Negative behaviors are self-oriented, being concerned neither with the pleasure nor the welfare of the other person(s), while "positive" behaviors involve a willingness to share not only the others' goal strivings, but also their pain, frustration, and sorrow. These definitions involve a kind of probability statement. They say, in effect, that other things being equal, if a person acted as the positive (or negative) definition specified, the probability would be raised (or lowered) that the needs, goals, self-esteem, and welfare of the other person(s) in the interaction would be realized (12). These definitions try to indicate the general ideas that make prosocial and antisocial behaviors what they are. Although they are, at best, rough hueristic categories, they can suggest a dimension of positive-negative interpersonal behavior along which to analyze the proposed changes in research in the behavioral sciences.

In the present study, the unit of analysis was the abstract of an article or book as it appeared in the Psychological Index or its successor the Psychological Abstracts. The sampling units consisted of the three volumes of the Index for 1900, 1910, 1920, and the six volumes of the Abstracts for the decades 1930-1970, plus the 1975 volume, the last year for which complete information could be obtained. The books and journals abstracted by these two publications provided an operational definition of what would be considered behavioral science research.

The coding system contained three different categorical dimensions. The most important was the positive-negative continuum discussed above. In addition, studies were coded for their use of animal, children, or adults

as subjects. Studies were also classified according to their methodologies. Briefly, "experimental" studies manipulated and measured the independent and dependent variables. "Descriptive" studies observed the antecedent conditions and described or measured the effects. "Theoretical" studies derived hypotheses and elaborated theories in which data were utilized but not collected. "Psychotherapy" studies emphasized the modificcation of behavior from "maladaptive" to "socially acceptable." Such studies involved both theory and data collection.[1] Each abstract was coded by two coders, with above 90% agreement for all reported categories.

Coding for the experimental subjects and methodologies categories was relatively simple. The abstracts were read and classified accordingly. In order to classify an article or book as positive or negative, the title and the abstract were perused for the presence of certain semantic markers, or key words. When the title or the abstract of the article or book contained a positive or negative key word, it was tallied accordingly. When the abstract was incomplete or unclear, the article or book, itself, was read.

The key words were derived in the following manner. A list of all nouns and adjectives used to describe behavior was culled from a sample of behavioral science journals published between 1900-1970. To engender some homogeneity upon the data to be analyzed, words describing moods and emotions, as well as words for institutionalized behavior patterns, such as "war," "delinquency," "democracy," etc., were eliminated. This restriction produced a penultimate list of 120 words, which was further reduced to 49 words by eliminating all the words not used at least once in a preliminary scanning of several recent Abstracts. These 49 words, plus 16 buffer words from the original list, were then given to 31 faculty and

advanced graduate students to be evaluated on a 9-point Positive-Negative Semantic Differential scale. Brief definitions of positive and negative were included as the anchor points for the scale, and discussed with the judges before they made their ratings. The 18 most positively rated words (highest means) and the 18 most negatively rated words (lowest means) comprised the final list of key words. The scaling procedure provided an objective assessment of the positive and negative dimension, and the selection of the words as far apart semantically as possible. The average mean scale value of the positive words was 7.5 (SD = 1.3), and, of the negative words, 2.6 (SD = 1.5), $p < .01$. These 36 key words, their scale values, and the percent of time they were used in the final analysis are given in Table 1.

For the periods 1900-1975 a total of 3,353 abstracts, articles, and books were analyzed, of which 785 (23%) contained "positive" semantic markers and 2,568 (77%) contained "negative" ones. Figure 1 shows the number of studies by decade from 1900-1975 categorized as positive and negative. From 1900-1920 there was clearly no difference in the number of positive and negative studies, although together they account for less than 1% of the total tallies. From 1920 onward, however, and continuing thereafter until 1975, Figure 1 shows that the sheer number of studies of negative forms of social behavior greatly exceeded the number of studies of positive social behavior.

The relative frequency of positive and negative studies by decade is given in Table 2. But the hypothesis pertains specifically to a comparison of recent trends. The most direct test of this hypothesis is provided by collapsing the proportion of positive studies for 1970 and 1975, which was .246, and the proportion of positive studies for 1950 and 1960, which was

.166. This difference between the magnitude of the proportions of positive studies for these two periods was highly significant ($p < .01$).[2] One could also have tested for the difference between the magnitude of the proportions for the combined decades 1930-1960, which was .183, and the 1970-1975 period. This difference was also highly significant ($p < .01$).[3]

We would also like to know whether the orientation of the studies affected their choice of subjects and methodologies. The answer to both questions is yes. For example, the use of human adults as subjects in positively oriented studies increased from 17% during the 1930-1960 period to 28% during the last decade ($p < .01$). By contrast, the use of animal research in positive studies declined significantly for these same periods, while the proportion of children as subjects remained about the same. We also found a significant increase in experimental and therapy studies toward a more positive orientation. Specifically, 23% of the 1930-1960 experimental studies were positively oriented, as compared to 29% for the 1970-1975 period ($p < .02$). For these same periods the positively oriented psychotherapy studies increased from 5% to 10% ($p < .04$).

In order to validate our coding procedures, however, a small subsample of the articles and books which had been abstracted was read in detail. The closer reading confirmed out coding operations, and revealed an interesting difference between many of the studies on positive and negative behaviors. Almost no studies discussed the values of negative kinds of behaviors, and many of them implied that these kinds of behavior must be controlled. By contrast, the implications were clear that positive kinds of behaviors were desirable, and often the articles discussed how they could be taught.

Of the several empirical findings reported above, perhaps the most important is confirmation of a modest but significant change in emphasis in behavioral science research from studies of negative to positive forms of social behavior. Behavioral scientists have always been, and still are, concerned with behaviors like aggression, anxiety, and prejudice, but now they are also interested in topics like altruism, empathy, and helping. And the results show that during the last decade there has been a disproportionate increase in the latter.

It is hazardous to interpret empirical trends going on before one's face, but perhaps the concomitance of the rhetoric for relevance during the 60's and certain trends within the behavioral sciences at that time help to explain the shift in question. The rhetoric for relevance, for example, increased the latent concern of behavioral scientists for the society of which they are also a part. Individual cases sometimes became important. For example, the media played an important part in focusing attention on the Kitty Genovese case (9), and that case became an important impetus for the strategy of subsequent intervention research (6). Another aspect of the demand for relevance was the explicit insistence that solutions be constructive and ameliorative rather than punitive. Part of the chant for relevance included the idea that punishment and incarceration were expensive and counterproductive. On the cultural side, therefore, there was heightened awareness of social problems and the implication that the behavioral sciences should make their contribution.

At about the same time there was the happy confluence within the behavioral sciences of several theories that raised unsettling questions or advanced counter-intuitive models (2, 4), and some research deriving

from these theories (1, 6) and other research that tended to provide solid scientific investigations of more or less forbidden topics, like attraction (10), helping and aiding (1), justice (7), and passionate love (11)--to mention only a few instances. In some behavioral scientists this trend led to a pessimism about the future (3, 5), but in others it led to a search for new concepts and new and revised theories.

Whether the pressure for relevance and the availability of revised theories and new research will produce a rebalancing of negative and positively oriented research in the behavioral sciences remains to be seen. But there is now ample evidence that the present shift in emphasis has brought with it an extension of theory, a broader interest in human nature, and a fearlessness in exploring new behavioral domains.

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Footnotes

Lauren Wispé is Professor of Communication and Psychology, The University of Oklahoma. A version of this paper was presented at the 1978 annual meeting of the International Communication Association in Chicago. Additional analyses and all the Tables are available from the author.

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[1]Two other categories were also used; sex of investigator and single versus multiple authorship. There were no significant differences for these categories, and they are not reported further.

[2]All p-values are for a two-tailed test.

[3]Although unanticipated, the proportion of positive studies during the combined decades 1930-1940, which was .260, was significantly different ($p < .01$) from the positive studies during the combined 1950-1960 decades, but not from the 1970-1975 period.

TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Positive and Negative Key Words

and Percent of Studies Coded by Each Word

Positive Key Words	Mean	Sd	% of Positive (N=785)	Negative Key Words	Mean	Sd	% of Negative (N=2568)
Affection	7.84	1.37	2.55	Aggression	3.45	2.05	24.65
Affiliation	6.23	1.31	5.86	Alienation	3.03	1.84	3.78
Altruism	6.94	1.65	6.11	Antipathy	3.45	1.41	.08
Attraction	6.76	1.41	13.76	Antisocial	2.45	1.27	1.25
Cooperation	7.45	1.34	19.24	Anxiety	3.39	1.34	37.11
Empathy	7.61	1.54	15.03	Authoritarianism	2.97	1.62	8.18
Friendship	7.74	.92	7.77	Cheating	1.81	1.28	.78
Generosity	7.23	1.77	.25	Deception	2.45	1.34	.66
Help	7.71	1.37	9.81	Dogmatism	2.39	1.10	3.78

TABLE 1--(Continued)

Positive Key Words	Mean	Sd	% of Positive (N=785)	Negative Key Words	Mean	Sd	% of Negative (N=2568)
Honesty	7.61	1.83	1.91	Egocentrism	2.90	1.99	.51
Humanitarianism	7.71	1.65	.51	Hostility	2.42	1.88	5.10
Liking	7.00	1.44	6.24	Intolerance	2.45	1.70	.16
Sharing	7.52	1.56	.76	Isolation	3.29	2.25	6.23
Sympathy	7.32	1.23	1.66	Jealousy	2.61	1.43	.66
Tenderness	7.23	1.43	.51	Lying	3.29	1.62	1.44
Tolerance	7.64	1.64	2.04	Narcissism	3.23	1.70	1.01
Trust	8.00	.88	5.10	Prejudice	2.10	1.71	4.21
Truth	7.71	1.22	.89	Stealing	1.74	1.29	.43
			100.00				100.00

TABLE 2

Number and Proportion of Positive and Negative Studies by Decades

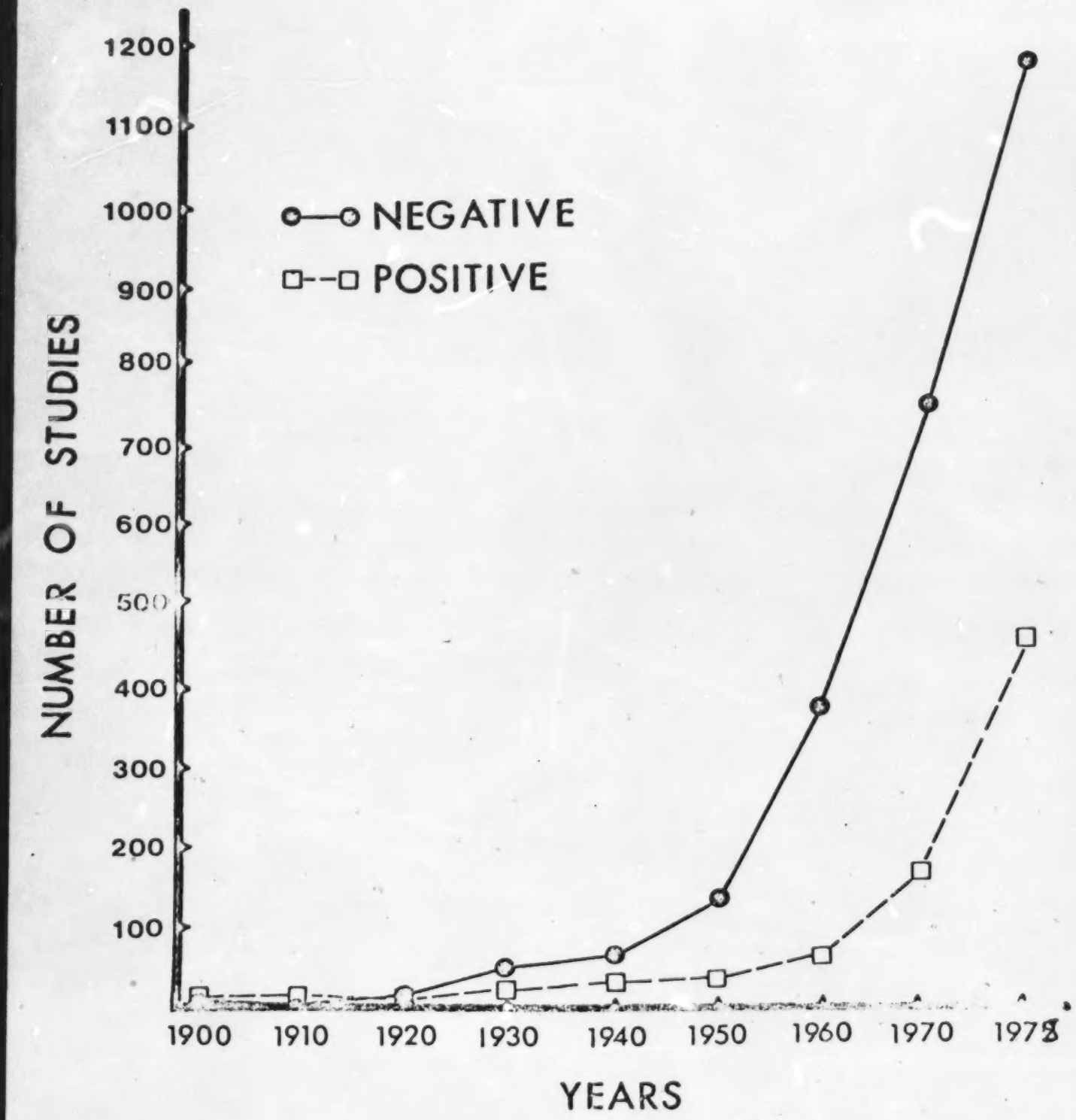
Decade	Positive Social Behavior		Negative Social Behavior		Totals	
	N	Proportion[a]	N	Proportion[a]	N	Proportion
1900	5	.55	4	.44	9	.0027
1910	6	.75	2	.25	8	.0024
1920	2	.20	8	.80	10	.0030
1930	14	.25	43	.75	57	.0170
1940	22	.27	59	.73	81	.0242
1950	25	.18	123	.83	148	.0441
1960	76	.16	386	.84	461	.1375
1970	177	.19	745	.81	922	.2750
1975	458	.28	1199	.72	1657	.4942
Totals	785	.2341	2568	.7659	3353	1.00

[a]Proportion of decade.

Figure Caption

Figure 1

Studies of positive and negative social behavior by decade 1900-1975


NUMBER OF STUDIES
1200
1100
1000
900
800
700
600
500
400
300
200
100
NEGATIVE
POSITIVE
1900
1910
1920
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
1978
YEARS